

through to heat the metal up to steak-frying temperature. Ellis' hand hit, sizzled, and jumped up in the air without Ellis having to engage his brain in the situation at all — pure reflex taking control. But the pain was just a blink behind the reflex, and Ellis shouted, "AIEE, SHIT!" and overreacted, pulling his arm back so hard that his elbow took out the passenger window of Corinne's car. Then he danced out from between the two cars waving his smoking hand and howling like a coyote.

Then Clete and Corinne got the giggles, Corinne looking over the roof of her car to say, "Stop it Clete. It's not funny," without convincing Clete or herself. Clete tried to stop and almost succeeded, but Ellis, out dancing in the middle of the lane, got hit by a passing car and fell face-first on its hood, and the slice of belly that grinned out from the space between the bottom of his t-shirt and the top of his trousers kissed that hot metal and sizzled like an egg on a griddle. Then the car's driver slammed on the brakes and dumped Ellis. He yowled and jumped up and turned and ran for the mall, for, presumably, the cool, clear fountain outside of Ed Nguyen's Oriental Fast Food Emporium, hiking his shirt up over his belly to keep it out of contact with the blisters that were sprouting on his skin.

Clete and Corinne's dual case of the giggles exploded into uncontrollable gales of laughter, and that caused a problem for Corinne. She had just finished a Diet Pepsi in her car, and her bladder was full to bursting. She stopped laughing for just long enough to gasp, "Oh, God," and then she staggered out from between the cars, her thighs clamped together, her shins spread apart, one hand pressed over her laughter-contorted face, the other burrowed deep into her crotch to catch the first of the dribbles of that so inevitable flow. And Clete, having laughed himself completely out of breath, completely senseless, forgot about the very event that had ignited his mirth, and he lay his forehead down on the shiny roof of Ellis' Oldsmobile. But not for long.

PORK CHOPS

Ellis drove east on Highway 76, rolling through the hills planted with strawberries, past the pungent dairy farms, and through Old Man Yoshimura's blooming orange orchard. He turned left in the little farm town of Bonsai and followed a winding, potholed, two-lane road into the foothills, out to an ancient grove of oak trees. He pulled off the road and parked under one of those old oaks and said, "Looks like a good spot, don't it, Clete?"

Clete was riding shotgun. He said, "Yes it does." Clete was getting quite chatty now that he was able to put sentences together. Ever since his stroke, it seemed to him like words were just buzzing around in his brain, bumping into the sides of his skull like trapped insects. But now he was beginning to get a handle on them; he was beginning to get things organized. "Yes, yes it does." he repeated, smiling, pleased with his accomplishment.

Sandra squealed in the back seat. Sandra was Ellis' wife's pet pig. Ruth had purchased her as a piglet in the mistaken belief that she was one of those exotic breeds that grow no bigger than a cocker spaniel. She was mistaken. The pig dealer was a crook. Sandra was a regular old-fashioned hog, and she weighed in at something over four hundred pounds as an adult. Ellis would have had her butchered down into manageable cuts and wrapped and stuffed into the freezer in the garage if his wife and little son Roy hadn't become so fond of her.

"Sandra," said Ellis, swinging her door open. "It's time you started to earn your keep." Sandra jumped out of the back seat onto the ground, crunching acorns and dried oak leaves under her hooves. "Truffles," said Ellis, waving a very costly store-bought specimen under her snout. "Go get 'em, girl."

Sandra trotted off into the dim, cool shade of the oak grove, grunting and sniffing the ground. Clete came around the car to join Ellis, his walk nearly normal now, using his cane more for peace of mind than as a walking aid. He would, perhaps, need its assistance later, if he got tired and his foot started to drag. "Truffles," he said to Ellis, pointing the cane's rubber tip at Sandra's butt as she slalomed around the gnarled tree trunks. "I bet she'll find you some. I bet she will."

But Ellis' dream of a nice supplementary income from Sandra's truffle-hunting expertise was not to be. Sandra had no experience hunting truffles. What she did have experience in was locating human food — table scraps from home and the discarded garbage from every household in her neighborhood, ferreted out of plastic trash bags and cans and gobbled down every Thursday early in the morning before the trash collectors came by. What she found in the grove was an encampment of illegal immigrants from Oaxaca, and since she had never had any reason to fear humans, she trotted into their camp site and sat up on her butt — a trick she'd learned from Clete's chihuahua Ginger — and begged for food.

The Oaxacans soon had Sandra strung up from a low limb by her hind legs, and one of them was moving toward her with a knife. Her screams saved her life: they brought Ellis in

at a run. The Mexicans heard the crunching footsteps and thought it was La Migra coming to take them back to their country, so they all disappeared like darting fish in the opposite direction into the grove.

Ellis cut Sandra down with the knife he found lying in the dirt. She hit the ground and took off at a gallop toward the car, bowling over Clete on her way. Ellis came by and helped him up, brushed the little clawing leaves off the seat of his trousers. Clete said, "I guess that....," he had to stop to search for some words, his face screwed up in concentration, "...that she found no truffles." Ellis said, "You got it, partner; none at all."

After Ellis and Sandra and Clete had gone, the Oaxacans regathered at their camp site. The transient images of pork chops and hot, juicy carnitas had flown away like sparrows. It was back to beans and tortillas for supper, but they were resigned to that, that would have to do.

YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO YOUNG

Ruth put little Roy, her four year old, down for a nap and fixed herself a cup of tea and turned on the T.V. and put her feet up. One of the talk shows, a good one: 'Men Who Left Their Wives for Younger Flesh and the Younger Flesh They Left Them For.' Four grinning, paunchy middle-aged dudes, their high foreheads sweating under the lights, their Lolitas sitting with legs crossed, their hair moussed up high, by the guys' sides. "Old goats," Ruth grumbled, the syllables blowing the steam off her tea as she raised the cup to her lips.

Glen, from Los Angeles, said, "Marti makes me feel so young." Marti smiled and grabbed his arm, pulled him into leaning on her by the crook of the elbow. He steered the elbow at her breast and squished it, and she squealed and gave him a playful slap. The show's host said, "Oh my," placing a Jack Benny hand alongside his cheek as the laughter swelled up from the crowd. "Disgusting," said Ruth.

Juanita, Ruth's next door neighbor, dropped by, fixed herself a cup of tea from the still-hot kettle and joined Ruth on the sofa. "My Clete ever thinks about runnin' off with a young chicken like that I'll kill him," she said. Ruth's feelings exactly, about her husband Ellis, and Glen's wife's too, apparently, because she entered the scene from stage right with a pistol in her hand, blew her hubby right out of his chair, right there on T.V. The Lolitas and the rest of the guests scattered, and the host jumped into the audience and dove behind the chairs in row two.